

Get Up and Go

Acts 8:26-39

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Northminster Presbyterian Church

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He is the first convert to the Way from outside of Israel/Palestine and yet we never know his name. He is perhaps the most puzzling figure in all of the Book of Acts because he is such a paradox.

We've come to call him the Ethiopian Eunuch. Why do I say that he is a paradox? Well, let's consider what we know about him:

1. He's rich. He owns a carriage and, assuming he's not reading the scroll of Isaiah on his cell phone while driving, he is wealthy enough to have someone driving him. That's remarkable. It marks him as super wealthy.
2. He's powerful. His role in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia is master of the treasury. He was entrusted with all of the wealth of the crown. Think of him as something like head of the Federal Reserve Bank and Secretary of Treasury combined in one position.

This is half of what we know about him. And what has our time in Luke this spring told us about people that are wealthy and powerful? We are supposed to be suspicious of them, but oddly not here.

What else do we know? Here's where the paradox comes in:

3. He's black. Ethiopian is code language in the Bible. Anyone identified as being from south of Egypt is generally believed to be dark-skinned. While modern concepts of race were not present in the ancient world, tribal identity and clan were always dividing characteristics. And this particular man was from further outside the circles of family and community than anyone else we've yet met in the entire New Testament, save possibly for the Wise Men in Luke 2.
4. Finally, he's a Eunuch. In the ancient world, outside of the Hebrew community, castration of males dedicated to court service was not uncommon. Minor sons in the royal household would be castrated so as not to pose a threat to the crown. They frequently were put in charge of finances or given responsibility over the royal household or wives. Castration generally happened before puberty, so the men would age, but not develop masculine features or facial hair. The 23rd chapter of Deuteronomy, the Law of Moses, says that Eunuchs are out. Those men who have been physically emasculated are absolutely barred from the assembly of the people. They were not to join, not to visit, not to associate. They were BANNED.

And so here we are. Philip is sent to the Gaza Road to meet with a man who is rich, powerful, foreign and banned from the assembly of the people.

Brian McLaren in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, imagines Philip's encounter with the Eunuch this way: "So our castrated official has come to worship in Jerusalem, but he has undoubtedly been turned away; his racial and sexual identities have put him outside

the worshipping community. In this light, do you feel the full pang of the question he asks as the chariot passes some water? 'I have just been rejected and humiliated in Jerusalem, but you have told me of a man who, like me, has no physical descendants, a scarred and wounded man who like me has been humiliated and rejected. Is there a place for me in [God's] kingdom, even though I have an unchangeable condition that was condemned forever by the sacred Jewish scriptures?'"¹

If you look at many sermons on this text, you will generally find they either treat the Eunuch like a man of great power who humbles himself as a seeker of truth or a Gentile sexual outlaw whose welcome in the church says something radical about inclusiveness that should directly inform our conversations about gay, lesbian or bisexual people in the church, and PARTICULARLY about transgender folk or others who do not conform to traditional ideas about gender and sexuality. Either of those ways of looking at this man is informative, and controversial depending on where you are.

But I'm wondering what it means for us, here in the Northwest corner of Evanston, that this curious seeker, who is baptized by Philip, is both one who comes from the center of power in one community but stands on the reviled fringes of the religious community. What does it mean that Philip represents the gospel in the first missionary foray into the world beyond the Holy Land and he is sent to both the powerful and the reviled, even if both types are combined in one person?

The first thing it means is that EVERYONE in the early church who hears this story will be unhappy about it. Those disciples who were attracted by Jesus' prophetic messages that called out the rich and the powerful and proclaimed God's preferential option for the poor will see his fancy chariot and his personal copy of the scroll of Isaiah and turn up their noses in disgust. He's the man. He's the establishment. He's the one percent. He can't be trusted.

But the deeply moral followers of the law, those who don't see Christianity as a new movement, but a continuation of the relationships and covenants announced in Hebrew Scriptures, will be horrified. He's not circumcised, he's mutilated. He's not one of them but a heathen from a heathen and mysterious court a world away from the children of Abraham and Sarah. And more to the point, he's anathema.

The gospel coming to the Eunuch is just not supposed to happen. He breaks everyone's idea of what the narrative is supposed to be. And yet, there he is, puzzling over the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, verses 7 and 8. And it provides an opportunity for Philip to share the gospel with him, to talk about the carpenter rabbi — who proclaimed a new world of love and grace, of justice and mercy, of peace and radical hospitality and who was put to death by the powers that be and yet rose to proclaim the victory of love and grace over sin and death.

¹ A New Kind of Christianity, Brian McLaren, p. 181.

Clearly Philip makes an impression, for the man asks: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The first hearers of Philip’s story could have answered that question with at least four reasons — allegiance to a foreign, pagan ruler, obscene wealth, mutilation, and the fact that he has not made any declaration of faith.

Did you notice that? He doesn’t say ANYTHING about believing. He simply asks if anything prevents him from being baptized. And Philip defies the book of order, the manual of operations and arguably the Bible itself when he says: “Nope, let’s go use that pond over there.”

Does this mean that the Eunuch’s faith is not important, that the only thing that is important is his desire to be a part of the community? I don’t think so because clearly something is born within this stranger that sends him joyfully down the road back the Ethiopia at the end of the scene. It’s not just because he’s baptized that he is joyful. It’s because becoming a Jesus follower obviously means something deeply profound and wonderful to him.

Perhaps that profound and wonderful response in his heart is born of his knowing that every faction of the tradition has a reason to hate him or reject him, and still, the good news is more powerful than their suspicions or fears or exclusionary doctrines or moral purity codes.

So what are we to make of that? First, if we can identify with any aspect of the Eunuch’s place in the story, it is simply good news to us too — those who have fancy chariots and drivers, and those who are reviled for who they are or how their gender or sexuality is expressed, and everyone in between.

So the gospel is good news to the Pritzgers and Rauners and to Oliver, the transgender teen I met on Monday at the District 202 School Board meeting where they voted overwhelmingly to welcome all students to use the locker room and washroom that conforms to the gender with which they identify. It is good news to the family of Jordan Edwards, the 15-year old freshman shot to death by a suburban Dallas police officer who defied police policy and fired his rifle at a car leaving a teen party. It is good news to Roy Oliver, that now-fired police officer charged with murder in connection with Jordan’s death.

How is that possible? What kind of gospel can be good news to rich and poor, to black and white, to Jerry Falwell, Jr. and RuPaul — to victim and perpetrator?

Maybe it means that the gospel, the good news of God’s love for us and our freedom living in the embrace of that love, is far more radical and in some ways far more demanding than anything we can imagine.

What if it means the gospel is intended to be so transformative that we can’t see anyone as an outsider anymore, no matter what our social position? What if it means that none of us is free to hate anyone else, even those who do evil things, even those who are themselves captive to systems of oppression and injustice?

Okay pastor, nice idea, but so what? We already like to think we believe that. What does that mean for us? I want to suggest it is right there in the first words of the passage: "Get up and go." God sends Philip out to proclaim something that seems ridiculous to the Eunuch, that he is a part of the beloved community, part of one community.

And I'll be honest with you, proclaiming one community right now, that's not only radical, it's probably dangerous. We are so divided now; the rancor is so great that declaring unity in Christ, like welcoming the Eunuch, is likely to tick off most of the folks who have so strongly lined up in the various camps out there.

That's because it means that we call for justice for millions who now live in fear that their very survival is placed at risk by a so-called health care bill that benefits the young, the wealthy and the healthy, and puts everyone else at risk. But we don't do that in a way that makes an "other" of those young, wealthy and healthy.

It means that we give thanks that our local high school is creating perhaps the most welcoming space for vulnerable young people in the entire state, while we also refuse to demonize those who see that action as unfaithful or contrary to their understanding of scripture.

It means we proclaim the human dignity and blessedness of immigrants and refugees and undocumented workers lured here by social, economic, religious and political freedoms and opportunities not available in other lands. But we listen and take seriously those who fear that their freedoms and opportunities are threatened in their eyes, requiring them to lose too much in order for all to have enough. It doesn't mean we have to agree with them, but we must hear them and respect them.

It means we can't simply sit idly behind our Facebook posts and letters to the editor, but we must, like Philip, get up and go and seek relationships with the Eunuchs of our day — the powerful, the wealthy, the rejected and the mysterious unknown. It means we must get up and go into the world as agents of Christ, communicating this gospel that simultaneously proclaims unconditional love in the face of hate and prejudice while at the same time refuses to let us hate the haters or meet their intolerance with our own.

And that, my friends, is hard. But it is life-giving. And it means that the calling of our baptisms, when we hear the voices who cry out:

What is to prevent me from being baptized?

What is to prevent me from being honored as a member of the human family?

What is to prevent me from being worthy of love?

What is to prevent me from having justice?

What is to prevent me from living a life free of oppression and hate?

That our answer in word and deed with all the conviction of Philip and all the joy of the Eunuch must be: NOTHING! Thanks be to God.